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To Be an Enlightened Superpower

The twentieth century passed with a vivid U.S. fingerprint on almost every aspect of human life. As we move into the twenty-first century, the magic of globalization and the information age has rendered U.S. influence omnipresent on the earth. The United States' primary role in world affairs is understood, but for many observers, it is full of contradictions. The United States pledges to stand for human rights and democracy, but this promise is coupled with a certain degree of hypocrisy. The United States claims to promote peace and stability but often intrudes into the internal affairs of others by abusing its supreme military power or waving the stick of sanctions. The United States cherishes a high degree of self-pride but often neglects to show respect to, and consideration for, the national feelings of others. Washington tends to seek absolute security for itself but is inclined to dismiss the legitimate security concerns of other countries.

Without the United States the world might be less stable and prosperous; but Washington certainly can do better in promoting peace, harmony, and prosperity in the world. Hypothetically, how can the United States act as an enlightened superpower? In particular, from a Chinese perspective, what are the ideal policies the United States should under-

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take in dealing with China and the Asia–Pacific region? To explore what an ideal U.S. policy should look like, the baseline must necessarily be current U.S. policy.

Neither Rosy nor Grimy Glasses

An ideal U.S. policy toward China should be based on a correct perception of China. The United States should develop a full appreciation of three issues before a sound China policy can be developed: how to understand progress and problems in a fast-changing China, how to treat a rising China with respect, and how to define the nature of Sino–U.S. relations.

The Chinese have always been upset by an oversimplified U.S. view of China. From 1979 to the spring of 1989, the United States had viewed China through rose-colored glasses. In that light, China was a country embracing economic reform, political liberalization, and a diversified social life. After the Tiananmen Square conflict, the United States swung to the other extreme, looking at China through a grimy lens and seeing a country that violates human rights, restricts religious freedom, pollutes the environment, and bullies Taiwan.

In fact, understanding China has never been that simple. China has made huge progress over the past two decades toward turning itself into a modern country. At the same time, it has been carrying too much historical baggage and now faces many new challenges. China is not as good as U.S. observers used to believe in the 1980s, but it is not as bad as they assume in the post-Tiananmen period.

In the real world, the Americans, affected by their cultural background, may never be able to overcome a black-and-white approach to understanding China. In an ideal world, policymakers in Washington would take a more balanced view of China's achievements and problems and be reasonably patient when expecting more fundamental and positive changes in this country. Moreover, U.S. policy would be geared to facilitate China's progress, not to hamper it. For example, on the issue of human rights, the United States should welcome China's progress,

while acknowledging the complexity of this issue and help China develop its social, economic, and political conditions to improve human rights even further. U.S. human rights policy should not be focused on sponsoring anti-China bills at the annual Geneva conference of the United Nations Human Rights Commission and on supporting a handful of political dissidents.

A second problem is the U.S. attitude toward a rising China. In the 1980s, the U.S. political elite stated that a strong China would help promote regional stability and serve U.S. interests. At the time, they perceived that a more powerful China would contribute to U.S. efforts to contain the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers no longer publicly claimed that they would like to see the emergence of a strong China. Instead, many U.S. strategists expressed concern, either publicly or privately, over the "China threat." Absent a strategic necessity to play the China card against a more threatening power, some U.S. policymakers worry that a stronger China would undermine the paramount U.S. position in East Asia and pose a challenge to U.S. interests in the region. In the real world, such a selfish and parochial view does have its currency; in an ideal world, however, the U.S. political elite would put China's rise in a broad perspective. First and foremost, they would come to realize that a stronger China will benefit the Chinese people. Having suffered from poverty and weakness in their modern history, the Chinese are eager to make their country wealthy and strong, and there is nothing wrong with their genuine wishes to reach this goal.

Moreover, a strong China would promote regional stability. The past has shown that, when China was poor and weak, a power vacuum emerged in the East Asia region. Chaos and turmoil prevailed in the midst of various powers' efforts to build their spheres of influence. Contrary to the concern of those who perceive a "China threat," a strong China is unlikely to be detrimental to regional stability. As Ambassador Chas W. Freeman convincingly argued, "China is not Germany, Japan, the USSR, or even the United States. China does not seek lebensraum; is not pursuing its manifest destiny; does not want to incorporate additional non-

Han peoples into its territory; has no ideology to export; and is certainly not a colonizer and does not station any troops overseas."[1]

Most importantly, the reemergence of China as a major power coincides with China's integration into the world community, which means that, as China accumulates greater material strength, it is also learning to become a responsible power. The past two decades have shown that China has become more responsive to, and cooperative with, international society. Based on this understanding, first, the United States should view the rise of China as an inevitable trend, welcome it, and interpret it as a great opportunity for peace and prosperity. Second, it should facilitate rather than obstruct China's growth into a world power and be sympathetic to China's pursuit of its legitimate national interests. Third, the United States should, through its own conduct, provide China with a model of behavior as a responsible power in the international community.

The third issue is the U.S. understanding of its relations with China. Two assumptions tend to complicate Sino–U.S. ties: that China and the United States have no common values and therefore cannot develop intimate relations; and that U.S. relations with China should be second to U.S. relations with historical allies in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The first assumption is flawed because, in fact, common interests do exist between these two countries. Although differing in ideology and political system, China and the United States have a wide range of common interests at the global, regional, and bilateral levels. History demonstrates that ideology has not impeded Sino–U.S. cooperation on many important issues that serve mutual interests. In international relations, what matters is not a country's ideology and political system, but its external behavior.

The second assumption is fallacious because it overlooks the fact that China is geopolitically more influential than any of the three U.S. allies in the region: Japan, the Republic of Korea, or Australia. For peace and stability in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, or Central Asia, Beijing can play a more important role than Tokyo, Seoul, or Canberra. As China's economic boom grows, so will its weight in re-

gional economic affairs, as demonstrated by its performance in the Asian financial crisis in 1997–1998. By refraining from devaluing its currency in the midst of the crisis, China helped prevent the already deteriorating regional economies from worsening.

In an ideal world, both the liberal and conservative wings of the U.S. political elite would judge the China–U.S. relationship on its own merits, not by political or security ideology. Washington would not predetermine China as either a "strategic partner" or "strategic competitor" but would define it through comprehensive interaction with Beijing. Although it would be prepared to handle ups and downs in bilateral relations, the United States would seek a better future for one of the most important relationships in the world. Finally, the U.S. political elite in the ideal world would prioritize statesmanship over domestic political disputes in relations with China, thus ameliorating the environment in which to develop Sino–U.S. ties.

The Taiwan Question

Questions surrounding two crucial policy issues—Taiwan and Asia–Pacific regional security—will determine the future of Sino–U.S. ties.[2] The Taiwan question is the crux of U.S.–China security problems. It is probably the only issue that may ignite a major military conflict between China and the United States and completely destroy bilateral ties.

In general, the Chinese hold three assumptions about U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Strategically, China believes the United States still views Taiwan as part of its "sphere of influence" in the western Pacific, a quasi-ally in the region. Politically, China believes the United States favors Taiwan's independence. Although the United States does not want to fight for Taiwan's independence, it prefers the maintenance of the status quo, namely, the de facto independence of Taiwan. Militarily, China believes the United States will continue to provide Taiwan with assistance, including the transfer of advanced arms and military technology, intelligence, and training. Should China resort to the use of force to integrate Taiwan, the United States would certainly intervene.

Those assumptions, true or not, reflect the mainstream Chinese interpretation of U.S.–Taiwan policy.

Ideally, the United States would think differently about the Taiwan headache and view the problem basically as a matter of nation-building for China, not as a U.S. issue in either a geopolitical or ideological sense. The United States would also understand that, in the long run, for Taiwan to gain security, international space, and greater economic opportunities, it must accept some association with the mainland while preserving its utmost political autonomy. If Taiwan seeks formal independence, Beijing will almost certainly resort to the use of force. If those events come to pass, even if China is not able to take over Taiwan, it certainly is able to throw the island into chaos.

Should the United States intervene at that point, it will have to make an extremely difficult decision about what price it is willing to pay to maintain, at a minimum, the present situation on Taiwan. U.S. military involvement, which would create even more trouble in the Taiwan Strait, will not end the problem. Compared with such a horrible scenario, peaceful reunification is in the best interests of Beijing, Taipei, and Washington.

Most importantly, U.S. policymakers would realize that, as long as the current U.S. Taiwan policy continues, Washington can never place its relations with a rising power on a solid basis. Beijing will remain suspicious of, and concerned about, the U.S. security presence in East Asia. The U.S. leadership would also not be able to expect Beijing's endorsement on strategic initiatives in regional and global affairs. Should the Taiwan issue be resolved peacefully, however, China will become a status quo power in the political–security sense; Sino–U.S. relations will be far more stable, healthy, and constructive; and China–U.S. cooperation will stand as a strong force for regional security and prosperity.

Based on this wisdom, an ideal U.S. Taiwan policy would adopt a refreshing new outlook. First, Washington would reorient its goal on the Taiwan issue from a "peaceful solution" to "peaceful reunification," because "peaceful solution" implies two possibilities: Taiwan's peaceful independence or peaceful reunification with China. By unequivocally

pledging to support China's peaceful reunification with Taiwan, the United States would dismiss the ambiguity in, and Chinese suspicion of, its Taiwan policy. Only by so doing can there be a peaceful solution for the disputes across the Taiwan Strait. Second, Washington would encourage Taipei to negotiate a reasonable arrangement for reunification with Beijing. Washington can act as an honest broker by presenting useful and creative ideas about reconciliation across the Taiwan Strait, or it can exert pressure from behind the scenes on both sides when dilemmas stall the negotiations. If Taipei tries to push the envelope and provoke China, the United States would ideally stop it.

On the issue of arms sales to Taiwan, in an ideal world, the United States would adopt a more sensible and responsible approach. Washington would ardently honor its commitment to China in the 1982 Communiqué not to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan and gradually to reduce its arms sales to Taiwan, leading, over a period of time, to a final resolution.[3] Also, Washington would make its arms sale policy compatible with the ultimate goal of Taiwan's peaceful reunification with China.

Regional Issues

On the issue of regional security, several questions will test U.S. policymakers: how to restructure the U.S. military presence in the western Pacific in a changing security context; how to manage its security alliances in a new geopolitical setting; how to encourage Japan to play a larger role in regional security without upsetting existing balances; and, finally, how to deal with the issue of theater missile defense (TMD) in East Asia.

In an ideal world, the United States would no longer view its military presence in the western Pacific as a means of bolstering its strategic interests in the region. With the ongoing reconciliation and inevitable reunification of the Korean Peninsula and the resumption of a normal regional security role for Japan, the United Sates would understand that a large-scale, permanent military presence would not be politically

sustainable either domestically or internationally. Ideally, as the international environment changes, Washington will try to find new ways to preserve its influence. For instance, a base-access arrangement in the region for U.S. forces would be more feasible politically and less expensive financially than maintaining a permanent presence in East Asia. The revolution in military affairs and the improvement of rapid-reaction capability will negate the need for the United States to keep a large armed force on foreign soil. Most importantly, Washington policymakers would understand that, in a time of growing economic interdependence and deepening regional integration, it is more relevant for the United States to lead by shaping the rules of the game and building a security community than to seek influence by showing off its military muscle.

Building security communities also affects the role of U.S. security alliances in the region. Washington's redefinition of its security alliance with Japan and others has clearly alarmed and alienated states such as China that have become very suspicious of U.S. strategic intentions. As countries feel threatened, they naturally respond by aligning with each other. The Chinese–Russian partnership, although still far from being an alliance, has become more substantive over the past several years in response to perceived aggressiveness by the United States in Asia and Europe. As a result, at a time when members in the Asia–Pacific region are supposed to build a community that promotes the security of all the regional members, U.S. reliance on alliances is deepening regional divisions.

In an ideal world, the United States would seek to promote common security (security for all), not unilateral security or collective security (security for some countries at the expense of others). In this context, Washington will play down the importance of security alliances. For existing alliances, the United States would stress their political rather than their military function and would seek closer diplomatic consultation and coordination among allies in dealing with regional issues, abstaining from rattling the alliance saber against a third party. Most importantly, policymakers in Washington would realize that a sound tri-

lateral relationship among China, Japan, and the United States is crucial to peace and stability in the Asia–Pacific region. Therefore, instead of uniting with Japan against China, Washington would spare no efforts to promote constructive interactions among the three parties.

The notion of a "pluralistic security community" would ideally prevail in U.S. security ideology. Like an Asia–Pacific economic community that benefits all economies in the region, a security community would advance equal security for all regional members. As Admiral Dennis Blair argues, "[S]ecurity communities are the right way ahead for the Asia–Pacific region." According to him, the goal is to build upon the current set of principally bilateral security relationships in the Asia–Pacific region to form a web of partnerships leading to mature security communities.[4] In this context, "pluralistic" means that the community is not based on a single pillar, but on several variables such as the consensus of major powers, the role of security alliances, regional or subregional mechanisms, and so forth. Differences in ideology and political systems should not obstruct cooperation on security issues. The United States would still play a significant role—not as a hegemonist, but as a key player.

In both the real and ideal worlds, Japan inevitably features prominently in U.S. policy configurations. The redefinition of the U.S.–Japan alliance, coupled with the rise of conservative political influence and nationalism in Japan as well as the perceived shift in Japan's security environment, has been driving Japan to become a traditional political–military power. An ideal U.S. policy toward Japan, however, would encourage Japan to remain a civilian and pacifist country. Realizing that Japan will and should become a normal state, the United States would advise Japan to be serious and responsible in dealing with its World War II legacy and to be sensitive to its Asian neighbors' concerns about Japan's future behavior. Although expecting Japan to play a larger and more active role in regional affairs, Washington would avoid pushing Japan to assume a high profile on security issues and to expand its already impressive military capability. With regard to the revision of Japan's Peace Constitution—particularly Article IX—Washington

would urge Tokyo to take into account the possible negative impact of such an action on regional stability as well as Japan's future. The U.S. administration would advise Japan's political elite to be cautious and responsible in dealing with one of the most important political legacies of modern Japan.

In an ideal world, Washington would not be addicted to the idea of deploying TMD in East Asia because it would understand the high risk of altering the existing strategic stability in the region and inviting an arms race. Even though security challenges to U.S. interests in the region will still exist, as a responsible power, the United States would be inclined to respond to such challenges mainly through nonmilitary means. For instance, Washington would seek to improve political relations with regional members, encourage economic cooperation and regional integration, develop a security community, and promote arms control measures. U.S. policymakers would firmly believe that U.S. security interests and regional stability were best preserved through arms reduction, not arms buildup.

Beyond Hegemony

Economic factors have become the most powerful engine for China–U.S. relations. The development of economic ties, however, has been invariably constrained by the conservative attitude of the United States on technology transfers and the politicization of economic issues. In both bilateral and multilateral settings, Washington has been pushing the agenda for trade and investment liberalization while neglecting the call from developing economies for bolder technology transfer on the part of developed countries. In particular, the United States maintains a discriminatory technology transfer policy toward China on the pretext of national security. The U.S. debate over whether to give China permanent normal trade relations and to facilitate its World Trade Organization membership was an example of efforts to politicize economic relations.

In a best-case scenario, however, the United States would consider the advanced science and technology it has developed as a public good

it can provide to all countries. While benefiting from such technology, those countries would work cooperatively and wholeheartedly to build world peace in return. In other words, advanced science and technology would no longer be a monopoly of the developed countries, but a means to promote peace, harmony, and prosperity on earth. Moreover, economic relations would not be affected by political considerations.

The twentieth century has often been characterized as the "American Century." In the twenty-first century, like it or not, the United States will continue to play a leading role in the world. The question for the United States and others is not whether it should play a role in world affairs, but how it should play this role. In reality, Washington may never see the world from this perspective, but the United States certainly will want to be a benign superpower, as some Americans often claim. To achieve that goal, Washington should not be content with the way it has been doing business. It should keep learning about the perspective of others, thus serving the interests of the United States and the rest of the world as well.

Notes

1. Chas W. Freeman Jr., "An Interest-Based China Policy" in Hans Binnendijk and Ronald N. Montaperto, eds., *Strategic Trends in China* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1998), 123–124.
2. Wu Xinbo, "U.S. Security Policy in Asia: Implications for China–U.S. Relations" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 22 (December 2000): 3.
3. "United States–China Joint Communiqué on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan" in Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China Since 1972* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution), 383–385.
4. Dennis C. Blair and John T. Hanley Jr., "From Wheels to Webs: Reconstructing Asia–Pacific Security Arrangements," *Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001).